

The Leading Lady

(Continued from Preceding Page)

possible. What ever her anguish, she could not risk betraying his whereabouts; if it had been only herself she would have dared anything. In this position, growing daily more unbearable, had suddenly come the means of escape. Tragedy, swift and terrible as a bolt from the blue, had been her opportunity, and she had despatchedly seized it.

From her window, after the interview with Stokes, she had seen Joe, in his Sebastian dress, pass below. She had known it was he because of the costume, and was astonished, supposing him already gone. Stokes came into view following him, and the disturbing idea seized her that he had mistaken the boy for herself. She had run to the door to go down and end the misapprehension, and then stopped—at close quarters Stokes would see who it was, and to let Joe—well-tongued and homesick—discover their rendezvous was the last thing she wanted. She went back to the window to watch the outcome, and saw neither of them. This frightened her—the only place they could have disappeared to was the summer house. Stokes might say too much before he discovered his mistake, and, panic-stricken, she was about to rush out when Joe ran from the doorway and the shot followed.

For a space—she had no idea how long—she was paralyzed, not believing her senses. She remembered moving back into the room, and from there she saw Stokes issue from the summer house and flee to the shelter of the pine wood. That told her what she had seen was real, a murder had been committed under her eyes, and she went to the door to go down. Holding it open, she raised her head, heard the voices below heard Stokes' entering words, and had made a forward step to run down and denounce him, when a sound from outside stopped her, Flora's cry that Sybil was killed.

It was that wild screaming voice that gave her the idea to run through her brain like a zigzag lightning. While the people below made their clamorous rush from the house she stood in the doorway motionless in contemplation of the possibilities that opened before her. The excitement that had shaken her mind steadied and cleared, she felt herself uplifted by an invincible daring and courage. There was no danger of a recovery of the body, for she had heard from Gabriel and Miss Pinkney that bodies carried out on the tide never found.

Alone on the second floor, with little fear of interruption, she had gone about her preparations at once. She had taken nothing from her own room but money from her purse (leaving a small amount to avert suspicion), the candles from the box on the table, a few crackers she had brought up the night before from a hunt through the scissors. Then, going to Joe's room, she had gathered the clothes he had discarded, lying ready to her hand on the bed—everything from shoes to the cap—and stolen out and upward to the top floor. Here she had put on the clothes and cut off her hair, she showed Anne the ends of the yellow curls in her jacket pocket—hiding her own clothes in a box in the storeroom.

The next day she had been a prey to a rising tide of alarm. From behind a curtain she had watched the search of the wall and realized a hunt through the top floor must follow. Every sign of her presence was obliterated and she studied her surroundings for a hiding place. The windows, opened half way to air the rooms, suggested the possibility of a cache outside. Climbing up the wall and cutting the vines, its outspread branches twisted into ropes—dense covered with a mantle of dense foliage. The main trunk passed close to the window of the room that faced the stair-head, the place where she sat waiting for ascending footsteps. When Anne had made her visit she had heard the first creak of the stairs and crawled out under the raised window. With a foothold on the gutter she had slipped behind the curtain of the vine, her hands gripping round the lines. Even from the garden below she thought it would have been impossible to detect. Of Anne's whispered pleadings she had heard nothing; she had supposed the intruder one of the men. When they came up she had plenty of time to hide, for they heard their footsteps when they came along the hall.

"Sleep!" she said, in answer to Anne's question. "I never thought of sleep. I was in this room all the time, waiting and listening. I didn't even dare to lie on the bed, for fear I couldn't get it smooth again. The candles and crackers kept me from being hungry. But when your whole being is on such a strain you don't think of those things, you forget your body."

After the visit of Rawson and Williams she knew the danger of detection increased with every hour. Also the necessity for food could not be denied much longer. The one chance left her was to get away that night, make what she felt would be a last attempt to gain the freedom that meant life to her. The darkness was in her favor, and she resolved to slip from the house and cross the bed of the channel below the causeway.

At the foot of the stairs she had hesitated, undecided whether to go by the living room or the kitchen. Finally she chose the way she knew best, where she was familiar with the disposition of the furniture. As the flashlight burst she had made a noiseless rush for the stairs, was in the upper passage when the women's doors flew open and Rawson came running along the hall below. The darkness and noise had covered her flight, but

in her eye on the top floor she had crouched at the head of the stairs, sick with uncertainty and dread. The concerted shrieks of the women had come eerily to her—cries of her own name. She guessed then a picture had been taken, they had seen it, and she waited, not knowing what was coming. She had stayed there a long time, listening with every sense alert, heard silence gathering over the house, and then gone back to her place by the window. "I hadn't given up, I had the spirit to fight still. But it was awful not knowing anything, what they were doing, if they'd found out I was alive. And what was I to do—stay here, get out on the island? I couldn't tell, I was all in the dark, and I felt my nerve weaken for the first time. And then I heard your voice, Anne. 'I'm coming to help you,' it said. She drew back and looked with solemn meaning into the other's face. 'You meant it? You will help me?'"

"Sybil, you know it."

"There's only one way you can."

"Any way."

"Let me go."

"Never tell—that you were here—that it wasn't you!"

"That's all right. Everybody believes it, let them go on believing. It was death, my life since that night when Jim disappeared. It wasn't worth going on with. Now I can go to him, be with him, there'll be no one watching Sybil Saunders any more. Even if I looked like myself it would be the chance resemblance to a murdered woman. And do I look like myself?"

She turned her face to the light, bright now with the coming of the sun. Below the smooth sweep of hair across her forehead it was so changed in its pallor and thinness, so bereft of its rounded curves and delicate freshness that it was only a dim reflection of Sybil's—the face of a wayward lad in which the same blood ran.

The havoc worked by the suffering that had so transfixed her, she felt the prick of tears under her eyelids and lowered her head—Sybil gripping at her happiness with the fierce courage of despair, and now Sybil going, breaking all ties, going forever. For a moment she could not speak, and the other, thinking her silence meant reluctance to agree, caught at her hands, pleading, with breathless urgency:

"They've accepted everything—it's all explained and ended. Joe has gone, dropped out of sight. Boys of his kind do that, do something they're ashamed of and disappear. What good would it do Stokes or Bassett or the police to know it was Joe who was killed? It's not lies, it's not being false to anyone, it's only to keep silent and let me go. Oh, Anne, we've been real friends, we've loved each other—love me enough to let me be happy."

The rim of the sun slipped above the distant sea line and sent a ray of brilliant light through the window. It touched their seated figures and lay rosy on Anne's face as she raised it.

"Go," she said softly. "Go. I'll never tell—I'll keep that promise as long as I live."

At the head of the stairs they clung together for a moment—a lifelong good-by. There was no time for last words, and they had no need of any. It was too solemn a farewell for speech. They were like shipwrecked comrades parted by tempest, Anne to find a haven, Sybil to ride forth on unknown seas, rapt and dauntless, following her star.

She could stay no longer, the house would be waking soon. There was a rapid interchange of last injunctions, information for Sybil's safety. Tonight at low tide she would cross on the causeway. Every evidence of her occupation would be removed, and with this in mind she took Viola's dress from its hiding place and gave it to Anne. No one, ransacking the top floor at Gull Island, would ever find a trace of her.

That night was cloudy—great black banks passing across the heavens. At times they broke, and through serene open spaces the moon rose, silencing the sea, turning the pools and streamlets of the channel bed to a shining tracery. A boy's figure that had started across the causeway in the dark was caught in one of these transitory gleams, a fitting shadow on the straight, bright path. It stood out in sharp silhouette, running on the slippery stones, then clouds swept across the moon, and in the darkness it gained the shore and the sheltering trees.

Dogs scented its passage and broke out barking; the sound followed its progress till the houses were passed and the road stretched on between quiet fields to the railway.

Some people heard the dogs—light-sleeping villagers who turned and wondered if a tramp was about and lapsed into comfortable slumber. In the stillness of the room where Stokes lay unconscious, drawing toward the hour of deliverance, the barking sounded loud and insistent. The nurse was disturbed by it and went to the window and looked out, but she never heard it. Anne did, and sat up in bed, following it along the edge of the village till it died on the outskirts.

Three years later Bassett and Anne had a friend at dinner. He was a writer who had just returned from a successful lecture tour in Australia. On his way back he had rapped through the pleasant reaches of the South Seas and had fallen under their spell—a little more money in his pocket, and for him it would be a plantation on some isle of enchantment. Not the

accessible places—they were already spotted; steamers had come, jazz music, and tourists in pith helmets with red guidebooks were under your feet. It was the remoter islands, still out of the line of travel, where a trading schooner was the sole link with the world. He had made a point of visiting some of these—hired an old tub with a native crew and gone bathing about and had a glimpse of the real thing that Stevenson saw.

And he enlarged on a particular island, the endmost of a scattered group, where he had found an American and his wife running a copra plantation. Delightful people called Whittier, he'd stayed several days with them in a long bamboo house on the edge of a lagoon—you couldn't imagine anything more beautiful.

Anne smiled at his enthusiasm and said she thought such a life might pall, especially on the lady. But he was convinced of the contrary; in fact, Mrs. Whittier had told him she never wanted to come back, she couldn't stand the futility and bustle of the world. And it was not as if she were a person unused to the refinements of life; she was a pretty, intelligent woman, cultivated, and fond of the arts, especially the theatre. She had asked him any amount of questions about plays and plays—said it had been the thing she loved most in the old days. But she didn't regret it; she had told him she regretted nothing but the separation from her friends.

After dinner, moving about in the sitting room, the guest had stopped before a photograph standing on a side table, picked it up and asked whose it was. Bassett had answered—a friend of his wife, now dead. But he would remember—it was Sybil Saunders, who had met with such a tragic death some years ago. The guest nodded; of course he remembered—a horrible affair. Then, after a last look at the photograph, he turned to Anne. "It's like that Mrs. Whittier I was telling you about. Just the same eyes—quite remarkably like, only she's a bit stouter and more mature. It might have been her picture when she was a girl."

When the evening was over Bassett escorted the guest to the door. On his way back to the sitting room he thought he would suggest to Anne that she put away the photograph—people noticed it and the subject kept coming up. It was evidently unbearably painful to her, for she rarely spoke of it; that dark chapter in her life was a thing closed and sealed. He had the words on his lips as he entered the room, and then saw that she held the picture in her hands and was looking intently at it, softly smiling, her expression tranquil, even happy. That was good—the wound had healed—so he said nothing.

THE END

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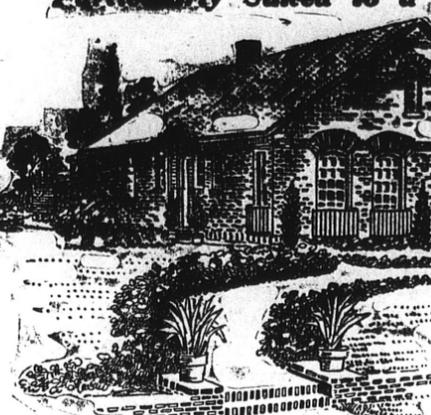
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